

MAY 8, 1972

Secret Air

Buildup in

Thailand

SF Examiner

BANGKOK — (AP) — The U.S. Air Force has built up its forces in Thailand in the last few weeks under a mantle of secrecy that has covered air operations here since 1964.

A withdrawal program which saw troop strength drop to 32,200 in May, 1971, has been reversed.

Informed sources said 2000 airmen arrived secretly in the last month to handle a new buildup of combat aircraft.

Another 3000 men are due soon.

Some are being flown in at night to avoid observation, informants said.

\$18 Million

Takhli Air Base, 100 miles north of Bangkok, built at a cost of \$18 million by the U.S. government and closed in 1971 as part of the withdrawal program, has been reactivated.

Some 200 American airmen are engaged in bringing the big base back to operational status for F4 fighter-bombers.

Ten squadrons, including Phantoms and B52s, have been ordered to Thailand since the North Vietnamese offensive began March 30.

Besides Takhli, U.S. airmen in Thailand are stationed at Udorn, Ubon, Na-

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korn Phanom and Korat, all in the northeast, and at Uta-pao, 90 miles south of Bangkok. Their aircraft range from the eight-jet B52s to helicopters and small observation planes.

In the current stepped-up air campaign, Thai-based planes are flying round-the-clock missions.

Secrecy

The present buildup has been done quietly.

What few announcements there have been have come from Washington, in keeping with the long-standing low-profile policy covering U.S. activities in Thailand.

Less than a week ago, the U.S. mission in Bangkok claimed there were no plans to reactivate Takhli.

Newsmen are not allowed under an agreement the terms of which have never been made public. Pilots and GIs have strict instructions not to talk to them.

Although the bases were built by the United States, they remain the property of the Royal Thai Air Force,

A U.S. official said recently there was no formal agreement — “just a handshake.”

“They can tell us to go any time they like,” he said.